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Character, the Fantastic, and the Failure of Contemporary Literary Theory

Roger C. Schlobin

ANYONE who has even dabbled in contemporary narrative theory is aware that there has been a blood bath. The author is dead; plot is dead. Amid this carnage, perhaps the most painful is the assassination of character. "... [B]y the 1950s [sic] and the *nouveau roman*, character, we were told, would henceforth join them [plot and setting] in exile from the novel" (Docherty x). While Norman N. Holland was referring to historical, not dramatic, characters, his 1968 observation is among the most jarring: the character "survives only in high-school teaching, in *The New York Times Book Review*, and the writings of Miss Mary McCarthy who, in this context, keeps strange company indeed" (246). Such patronizing tone also underlies A. D. Nuttall's statement of progress in literary study: "At one time, everybody used to talk about Shakespeare's characters as if they were real people. Today, simple folk, like Lord David Cecil and Professor Dover Wilson, still do; but the critically with-it do not, believing that this kind of talk makes no sense" (107). As early as 1930, G. Wilson Knight remarked that "The persons, ultimately, are not human at all, but purely symbols of a poetic vision" (16), and in 1933, C. H. Rickword pronounced that "'character' is merely the term by which the reader alludes to the pseudo-objective image he [sic] composes of his responses to an author's arrangement" (31). Thomas F. Petruso points toward the assassin more specifically: "Ever since Paul Valéry's attack on 'literary superstitions'—defined as all 'beliefs' that ignore the verbal condition of literature, including the existence of character, 'those beings without innards' (1960, 569)—French criticism and its American derivatives have led the way toward the reduction and exclusion of character, while shifting the focus of attention to strictly linguistic or rhetorical phenomena" (4).

Whenever it all began, writers' claims that their characters take on lives of their own has been pronounced by many to be a cliché (Holland 272), thereby dismissing Cervantes' calling Don Quixote his "child," Flaubert's identifying himself with Emma Bovary (Rawdon Wilson 747), and Henry James' calling his characters "my agitated friends" (Springer 1). "Modern criticism, by and large, has relegated the treatment of character to the periphery of its attention, has at best given it polite and perfunctory nod and has regarded it more often

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as a misguided and misleading abstraction" (Harvey 192). Vladimir Propp's stock characters reduce them to functions in plot (66; also Chatman 114). Formalists and some structuralists, calling upon Aristotle, support Propp. For French narratologists, characters are means, not ends. "Tomashevsky and Barthes ... seem to imply that a character is nothing but verbal scapes (physical appearance, thoughts, statements, feelings) held loosely together by a proper name" (Martin 118). Many, like Roland Barthes, see character as only a type of discourse (179). For A. J. Greimas, they are "actants" (Millington 84).

Whatever the means of the death of the character, Barthes proclaims, "What is obsolescent in today's novel is not the novelistic, it is the character ..." (95). Indeed, it is the rare contemporary study of fiction that even has an index entry for "character," and character theory has been a very rare topic for book-length studies in the last fifteen years.

The attempts to explain this phenomenon are legion. In general, Jeff Williams observes, perhaps correctly, that "criticism is no longer as much 'close reading' as it is theoretical speculation, on language, interpretation itself, society, gender, culture, and so on" ("Packaging" 282). Certainly, character may have fallen to what Leslie Fielder describes as the process by which insights turn to fads and finally to pedagogical tyranny (29). Androgyny, for example, was eliminated by feminism; Black Studies by cultural pluralism. And it does seem that literary studies are now anything but and that characterization is only "the game of ideology" (Cixous 384) and should be read as such.

From a socio-historical perspective, Robert Alter suggests the general move from aesthetic to scientific or sociological approaches has provided "an attractive retreat from history" after the Vietnam years (7). There are those, like Robert Scholes, who would contend that the decline "in characterization has been attributed to the exhaustion of a vein, all the types of character having already been quarried by previous generations of laborers" ("The Novel" 210). Such statements, however, should be moderated by the knowledge that numerous art forms have been pronounced moribund throughout history. For example, some eighteenth-century critics "felt that the form [the novel] had creatively exhausted itself" (Taylor 629).

Others think that some inhuman urge has doomed character. Richard Rorty, for example, blames it on immorality: "The current struggle in American literary circles between robust, old-fashioned storytelling novelists and ironist critics is a symptom of the inability of intellectuals to take such novels seriously as moral testimonies. They mine them for ambiguity, intertextuality. and the like, because they do not really recognize *morality* as a possible form of life" (179-80). Philip Roth, via his English Professor in *The Professor of Desire*, exposes the conspiracy that literary study is constituted to hide the fact that professors and literature have any relation to flesh and blood (181-3). Alter argues that "the attack on mimesis ultimately depends on

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defining experience out of existence," a process that "leads to a misreading of whole categories of literary works" (9). Jonathan Culler contends the relatively recent " ethos of structuralism runs counter to the notion of individuality and the rich psychological coherence which are often applied to the novel" (Culler, *Structuralism* 230).

Others share this sense that individualism and personality are no longer of interest and that characters no longer draw audiences. Ellen E. Berry points to mass culture as the executioner of character: "Character as unique personality is replaced by the immediacy and transitory appeal of the public icon, an image created by mass media such as cinema, widely available to a heterogeneous audience and capable of unlimited reproductivity" (177). Such icon status is apparent in the Chicago press at this moment as Michael Jordan's nickname, "His Airness," merits capitalization usually reserved for the supreme deity.

M. H. Abrams may take the most pragmatic approach with the suggestion that the dismissal of character study for fresh alternatives may simply be to relieve boredom: new reading strategies provide "freshness of sensation" and make it easy "to say new and exciting things about a literary work that has been again and again discussed." Thus, "We gain a guaranteed novelty, of a kind that makes any text directly relevant to current interests and concerns" (295). For those who have been teaching the same courses and same works for year after year, this certainly sounds sensible.

The authors themselves (even though they're dead) do not escape blame. In his chapter "The Decline of Character Intensity," Robert Higbie observes that "Many modern novelists of course still create characters with tension like those in earlier novels, but they rarely seem to value character as an end in itself as their predecessors did. Instead, writers became more concerned with what I have called secondary response, with thematic and formal concerns" (164). "Hence the present-day novel must be the opposite of a story" (Ortega 65). "The creation of character is a form of art, whatever else, and the modernist novel seems at times to have abjured this art for others, as cubism shattered the portrait and disposed its elements in new ways" (Price, *Forms* 47-8).

Yet another reason is the attempt to empiricize literature and the arts, indeed the creative imagination itself. As Thomas C. Schelling comments, "The human mind is something of an embarrassment to certain disciplines, notably economics, decision theory and others that have found the model of the rational consumer to be a powerfully productive one" (191). "The fervor with which linguistic-based theories were embraced in the sixties was a reflection not just of their utility, but also of particular ideological context, namely, the desire to put the humanities on a more scientific footing" (Petruso 5). Certainly, this scientific solution to "embarrassment" has been fueled by economic pressures that have forced so many humanities' departments to count beans and by the recent identification of students as consumers and art as

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product to be delivered pre-cooked to mental doorsteps as if aroma, not concentration, is the key to education.

This movement to scientific approaches has, of course, been the major method by which characters have been relegated to data. The vehicle is such critical schools as structuralism and rhetoric. Numerous articles in these fields are more like geometry exercises than aesthetic explorations (e.g., Schleifer and Velie). Some find such an approach atrocious. Robert Alter, in his description of the attack on mimesis and his defense of it, says in regard to French criticism, "There is something satisfying in the idea that literature, for which such excessive claims have been made, can be pulled down to the level of all other modes of discourse; and even more important, the prospect of a value-free study of literature is positively consoling after the apparent failure of engaged [New] criticism as an idea" (8). He goes on to contend that definitions, like Jonathan Culler's, which turn *homo sapiens* into "*homo significans*, maker and reader of signs," create a critical "epistemological shift." "...[I]n this approach there are no discernible 'objects' of knowledge in human experience, only signs to be interpreted, and hence man [sic] can no longer be defined as the knower. What immediately follows from this assumption is a global expansion of the concept of *text*" (Alter 9). Culler himself is critical of structuralism's ability to account for character: "Character is the major aspect of the novel to which structuralism has paid least attention and has been least successful in treating. Although for many readers characters serve as the major totalizing force in fiction—everything in the novel exists in order to illustrate character and its development—a structuralist approach has tended to explain this as an ideological prejudice rather than to study it as a fact of reading" (230). Steven Cohan is even more emphatic in his condemnation of the structuralist approach: to understand character as part of the "'verbal structure of the work' assigns to it the same textual status as rhetoric, and this designation claims to eliminate from the human figures its representation as *human* status entirely" (Cohan 116). It seems, then, that there is much effort here to dissolve the connection between art and the world, art and people, via what Alter offers as the two strategies "for dissolving the connection between literature and the real world": 1) reduce "everything to text" and 2) reduce everything to "arbitrary linguistic signs" (10). In fact, within this new epistemology, it is possible "to argue that a lover's caress is every bit as 'semantic' as a traffic light" (Alter 10).

Yet all of this, regardless of its justification, seems to eliminate any response to literature other than some sort of puzzle solving; the principle of pleasure is dismissed. "The primary experience of a work of art takes place in the orientation to its aesthetic effect, in an understanding that is pleasure, and a pleasure that is cognitive. Interpretation that bypasses this primary aesthetic experience is the arrogance of a philologist who subscribes to the error that the text was not created for readers but for him [sic], to be interpreted by such

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as he" (Godzich, "Preface" to Jauss xxix). Such an approach does seem to negate experiences of a history full of readers. The characters of this approach and this new fiction "will be what they are: word beings"—as unstable, changeable, illusionary, unnameable, fraudulent, and unpredictable "as the discourse that makes them" (Federman 13). The inevitable conclusion yields to the tyranny of the extreme position of reader theory and the contention that the reader is all. As Seymour Chatman concludes in *Story and Discourse*, "Characters do not have 'lives'; we endow them with 'personality' only to the extent that personality is a structure familiar to us in life and art" (138). Traits of personality as a way "to analyze character in no way implies their 'lives' extend 'beyond the [fiction] in which they are involved'" (137-38). Chatman is following Marcel Proust's doctrine that all knowledge exists within the reader, and "the book" only aids in its release: "In reality, each reader reads only what is already within himself [sic]. The book is only a sort of optical instrument which the writer offers the reader to enable him [the reader] to discover in himself what he would not have found but for the aid of the book" (Proust II:1024). Such attitudes imply that characters teach nothing to readers, and in fact, they are anti-intellectual.

Most of all the death of character flies in the face of documentation of the incarnate quality readers and viewers attach to character. On a profound level, there are those who speak of changed lives and role models. For example, in response to thinking about various novels, Virginia Woolf said, "If you think of these books, you do at once think of some character who has seemed to you so real (I do not mean lifelike) that it has the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes - of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul" (Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett" in Hoffman and Murphy 32). Charles Child Walcutt's *Man's Changing Mask: Modes and Methods of Characterization* amplifies this didactic, informational message: "clearly we read fiction because it is about people and because we expect to learn something about them, which is another way of saying that character is the central substance of fiction" (5). On a more pedestrian level, even television's characters have impact. Schelling reports, in "The Mind as Consuming Organ," that "Lassie died one night. Millions of viewers, not all of them children, grieved. At least, they shed tears. Except for the youngest, the mourners knew that Lassie didn't really exist" (177). Of course, Lassie wasn't a real dog, Moby Dick a real whale, or Gandalf a real wizard. However, "Once we become immersed in a fiction, the characters become real to us, and the world they live in momentarily takes the place of the actual world" (Ryan 21). "We [readers] are propelled by its [a story's] *human interest*, by a sympathy or antipathy that cause us 'to understand the successive actions and thoughts and feelings of described character with a particular directness, and to be pulled forward by this development almost against our

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will' [from Gallie *Philosophy and Human Understanding*, 45]" (Holdheim 237). The fantastic, of course, encourages this as legions of scholars have indicated.

Readers, like the audience that desperately wants an amateur public speaker to do well, "want the novelist to linger and to grant us good looks at his [sic] personages, their being, and their environment till we have our fill and feel that they are close friends whom we have known thoroughly in all the wealth of their lives" (Ortega 66). "People capture and engage characters" (Schelling 180). "Authors have continued to develop the novel as a medium of authorial expression even as theorists, pursuing their own interests, have disavowed the possibility" (Petruso 196). "Characters resemble people. Literature is written by, for, and about people. That remains a truism, so banal that we often tend to forget it, and so problematic that we as often repress it with the same ease" (Bal 80). "The great novelist, contemptuous of the surface of his personages, dives down into their souls and returns, clutching in his [sic] hand the deep-sea pearl. But for precisely this reason the average reader does not understand him" (Ortega 98).

To some extent, "Even theorists who formerly reduced character to 'actants,' defining them only as byproducts of the functions they performed, have come to recognize that ignorance and knowledge, vested in character as an independent entity, are crucial to an understanding of narrative theory" (Martin 117). "'Character' occupies a privileged position in the novel or the play; without 'character,' passive or active, no text" (Cixous 386). Character cannot, as Vladimir Propp and the structuralists maintain, "be restricted to denoting certain types of agents for certain typical acts" (Gelley 60). Propp's "Act of a character" (21) cannot be "correctly determined if the motives of the character are left out of account" (Bredin 298). Most pragmatically, "character is a needed term. Removed from discourse, character would leave a significant area unaccounted for, a blatant x that would require a name, a critical designation" (Rawdon Wilson 749).

Theory that types characters does seem limited. A. J. Greimas identifies subject (the agent), *adjuvant* (any character or element assisting), obstruant (any element that hinders the agent), *destinataire* (indirect object of the beneficiary), and *distinateur* (the element under whose auspices, or in regard to which, the agent is activated) ("Les actants"), sender, mandator, and manipulator (Greimas and Fontanille 30-31). David Galef, in *The Supporting Cast: A Study of Flat and Minor Characters*, lists other types, such as enablers (18), foils and contestants (18-9), doubles or doppelgängers (19), emphasizers (19-20), foreshadowers (28), tellers (32), mergers (or unifiers), misapprehenders (56, like naysayers?), and listeners (58). In making character subject to plot and action, Norman N. Holland makes one of the more uninformed comments when he observes that "literary characters are so shaped by the world in which they exist that they cannot even be moved from book to book

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or play to play" (266). Even if the movement of specific characters among media—literature, film, comic books, multimedia—is ignored, Faust, King Arthur, and Grendel seem to have travelled very well from genre to genre, mode to mode.

Of course, such "types" can easily be dismissed as being too simple. To restrict character to Greimas' actant alone "is probably to write either a fairy tale or a rather short story" (Millington 84). Actants and types do seem inadequate in accounting for the richness of such characters as the shaman, for example (Schlobin, "Pagan"). To explicate Gandalf as the "great explainer" and as part of Frodo's "Adjuvants," as Brooke-Rose does (237); to think of Iago as obstruant; or to term Ben Jonson's Mosca as even something as sophisticated as the wise servant is insensitive and simpleminded, if not outright vapid. Of course, the simplicity is often disguised by what Leslie Fiedler calls "the hermetic jargon invented by elite French critics, bent on undermining the authority of primary texts and the autonomy of their authors" (32). Many theorists demonstrate the lack of literary referentiality by the frequent omission of literary illustrations in their writings. Many choose or are forced to create their own little, elementary tales to illustrate their theories.

Before dismissing such typing too quickly, it should be observed that main characters in fantastic literature are frequently stereotypes. One reason for this is that, in general, it is a conservative tradition (Schlobin, "In Search") that looks to the past for its models. Many of these characters "and their traits emerge from their place in an ancient narrative" (A. Rorty 307). Moreover, "Since the virtuous protagonist seeks to submit to an idealized parentlike [sic] control, he [sic] is often somewhat childlike" (Higbie 34). Contemporary structuralism is helpful when examining protagonists and stock secondary characters if only because those of heroic fantasy are usually so literarily generic that they're non-distinctive and, anyway, are such dolts that they need help illuminating themselves much less anything else. However, secondary characters and settings do appear to occupy critical places in the establishment of the fantastic's other or alternate worlds. Very frequently, they are the messengers, explicators, and implementers that readers and protagonists need to understand and accept the cosmological natures and epistemological contexts of the literature, or they are essential to the action and for the success of the plot, as fellowships are to heroic quests. Thus, the main characters need to be surrounded by these forces to achieve their own completeness or balance. For example, few who have read C. S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength* will forget the scene in which Ransom reveals himself as the Pendragon to the newly-awakened Merlin (274). It can be interpreted as a pivotal epiphany, an epic moment. However, it is anticlimatic since readers have learned Ransom's identity far earlier. Pages before, Denniston mentions it in conversation with Camilla and Jane Studdock (115), and it is repeated again by Camilla when it appears Jane has forgotten (195). While Jane is certainly central to the

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novel, Denniston and Camilla are not by any measure. Nor would anyone see Hari Seldon's appearances in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation and Empire* as anything more than plot dramatics, focusing frequently on the irony of too little, too late.

However, while many primary and secondary characters in fantasy fail to invigorate or inspire that does not mean that there aren't a significant number who do and whose vitality cannot be reduced to type. This may be true of literature in general. Galef observes that secondary characters may be flat but possess a vitality that goes beyond the fact that they are minor, that secondary characters persist in memory, and "science-fiction novels, more than mainstream works, depend heavily on background figures to explain the worlds they depict" (1-2, 13). William Harvey explains that "a background figure, a mere stereotype, may be granted a moment of dramatic intensity in which he achieves fullness as a human being" (55). In regard to drama, Mahood further supports the contention that "minor" status does not mean minor impact: "In a yet further orbital of a Shakespearean play there move characters who are neither heard nor seen but who have a claim on our interest as denizens, and sometimes powerfully influential ones, of the social world the dramatist creates in each play" (6). Certainly Judas teaches that "The number of lines spoken is in any case an unreliable guide to the importance of a bit part" (Mahood 4). Lila's mother, in Peter S. Beagle's "Farrell and Lila the Werewolf" (1971), and his butterfly, in *The Last Unicorn*, are powerful instances of this in fantasy. To reduce them to assistors or enablers robs them of the lives that older character theory gives them.

Among the saddest, if not the most pathetic, of secondary characters are the artisans (Schlobin, "Artisan"), yet contemporary theory would label them as just "enablers." Doomed to be the hands of others' imaginations, they labor in relative obscurity producing the talismans that are often at the centers of fantastic quests or tasks. Consider Yama, the creator of all the gods' weapons and marvels in Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light*. He is the eternal, pimply-faced nerd despite the bodies he assumes. Likewise, Sauron tricks the Elves into making the Rings of Power, and the crippled Ged, in Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Wizard of Earthsea*, suffers as a plodding laborer after he releases his shadow (70). In an anonymity that is often so severe that they are not in the work at all, these artisans suffer the blue-collar derision of the elite and the powerful. Their skills and dexterity are overshadowed by the fabulous, intuitive, and supernatural. They exist beyond the pale, below the salt. In fact, when Brian Attebery discusses A. J. Greimas' "actant" versus Robert Scholes' content character, who is much more interesting for content (73), artisans don't even make the cast list. They are frequently off-stage in an *a priori* world, having supplied the talismans that any player may use. Thus, the ancients in Talbot Mundy's *Jimgrim* never see Dorje's maimed use of their discoveries, Tolkien's Elves watch helplessly as Sauron perverts their creations for his

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own use, and Edmund Cordery, in Brian Stableford's *Empire of Fear*, dies ignorant of his own scientific success in transferring his plague to the vampires (78). Until Jane Yolen's "Evian Steel" added a new chapter to the ongoing Arthurian myth, the Lady of the Lake was nothing more than a pickup-and-delivery service.

What is most important here is to realize that part of what makes fantasy's characters incarnate is the traditional and historical baggage they carry. All characters in James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" are secondary, and the protagonist or titular wizard and ringmaster in Charles G. Finney's *The Circus of Dr. Lao* is less important than the young boy or the fabulous creatures and personages that inhabit the midway. The blind artisans in Avram Davidson's *The Phoenix and the Mirror* or Gollum in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings are minor. Their traditional roles make them who they are and make them pivotal to the action and its culmination. Their lines may be small; their natures derivative. For a character like Gandalf, the mantel of a Prufrockian attendant lord seems ill-fitting. He is certainly the explicator of the nature and terrors of Middle-earth, whether it be fireworks or the Rings. However, when all hangs in the balance, he may be no more than a decoy, but he is that even if his epic lies somewhere with the Balrog and in his transformation to Gandalf the White—a story left unsung. Thus, whether it be the result of counting lines or appearances or by the more triumphant achievement of Samwise, Gollum, and Frodo, Gandalf is secondary despite his power and wisdom as shaman. Thus, it is curious that so much skill and ability is relegated to lesser status and remains so memorable. Megan Lindholm's Seattle and street-people-wizards' numinous world in *Wizard of the Pigeons* stretch types beyond their breaking points, explode them, as do L. Frank Baum's Scarecrow, Cowardly Lion, and Tinman and Lewis Carroll's rabbit hole full of lunatics.

What can be concluded then? One obvious answer is that contemporary criticism is involved in the dystopian "rather spend than mend." New is best. This is a sad failure since it sees theory and literary approaches as linear progressions, evolutions—not as a pool populated by numerous species of fish, anyone of which can be caught and served at the appropriate occasion. All approaches should always be available. For them not to be is to glorify the mentality of the one-trick pony.

Actants and types may place characters within a fiction's interaction very well; however, they cannot account for why Lin Carter's or Robert E. Howard's antagonists are different from Tolkien's or Shakespeare's. Joel Weinsheimer's solution to the conflict between mimetic and semiotic theories of character requires a multiple perspective, but it is obviously intelligent; ". . . despite the fact that they are mutually contradictory . . . characters are both people and words" (210).

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